

WASHINGTON BOOK NOTES

Knebel's Latest a Political Thriller

By BONNIE AIKMAN
Star Staff Writer**VANISHED.** By Fletcher Knebel. Doubleday & Co. 407 pages. \$5.95.

Fletcher Knebel's years of political reporting in Washington have equipped him with a profound knowledge of the workings of our democracy. But no such insider-turned-author could have achieved his mastery of fictional microcosm without the special gift of a creative insight.

"Vanished," his seventh novel (fourth without the collaboration of Charles Bailey II) was published Friday by Doubleday, and before the New Year's glow has diminished the event should trigger a reshuffling of those recently moribund best-seller lists. "Vanished" is one of the most powerfully told and realistic political suspense thrillers to appear in years. The book will surely equal, if not surpass, the popular impact of the 1962 Knebel-Bailey hit, "Seven Days in May."

The story is complex. Two months before a presidential election a leading Washington



—Thomas McGeath
FLETCHER KNEBEL

attorney and close friend of the chief executive vanishes from the golf course of the Burning Tree Country Club. At first, personal and public mystification is complete. Stephen Greer was known as a man of impeccable character, though not without infrequent, if harmless, flights of eccentricity. But sinister clues begin to

emerge which can have implications in several scandalous directions — embezzlement, defection, a homosexual liaison. Before the week is out, hopes for a landslide victory for President Roudebush are placed in serious jeopardy and the panic is on.

Mr. Knebel dissects the mechanism of official Washington and lays it bare before the reader. An aroused press begins a marathon siege on the office of the White House press secretary. The portrait of honest, indefatigable Gene Culligan, who tells his own story in an otherwise third-person narrative, is a sympathetic rendering of that difficult job. Culligan is baffled by the President's decision to deny him access to the FBI's reports on the case. The FBI in turn is frustrated by an executive order seriously hampering its normal investigative procedures. Worse off is the CIA, whose director bristles under a stern "hands-off" command from Roudebush. (The novel's unflattering view of that super-secret organization is gleefully nailed down by Mr.

Knebel in the surprising denouement.)

The characterizations throughout are superbly drawn — President Roudebush is a towering figure combining the steel of a Johnson with the earthy charm of an Eisenhower. Crack FBI agent Larry Storm is a sensitive Negro who compromises his position for a higher loyalty. Dave Paulick is the yarn's bulldog newsman who comes within a day's deadline of breaking the top story of his career, only to drop from public view himself.

Through it all, the narrative pace and the clarity of the plot never diminish. Knebel manages to keep a thread of one sequence taut in the mind of the reader while picking up another, and another.

There is little humor in this novel, and only a token amount of sex and romance. Even Gene Culligan's affair with his secretary takes a sober turn when the liaison leads to a major revelation in the Greer case. But that lack, if it be one, will surely be met when Hollywood, inevitably, puts its celluloid imprint on "Vanished."

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